

On Three

by CaptainOzone

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Summary: "I justâ€”I just keep thinkingâ€”what if something happens? What if Hawkmoth gets me? What if what little luck I have runs out? What then?" In which the saddest have smiled their brightest and Ladybug and Chat Noir come to the mutual decision that it's time for the secrets to end.

1. Chapter 1

"Alright, what's wrong with you?"

"What?" Chat Noir asked, sounding as though he'd been slapped out of a vivid daydream.

Ladybug pursed her lips and swung around to peer down at her partner. The two superheroes had come to a dead stop on the side of a building, and Marinette saw he had braced himself up on the windowsill beneath her. The dusky lamplights dotting the streets below were not enough to dispel the shadows cast over his face, but no shadow could hide those gleaming green eyes from her.

"Why have you stopped?" he called up to her. "We have half of our route left!"

Easing up on the tension of her yo-yo string, Ladybug abruptly dropped to his eye-level. Obviously, the move was unexpected, and he started and hissed, nearly slipping off the ledge upon which he was perched. If he had any real fur, it surely would have been standing on end.

She laughed, steadying him with a gentle hand. "Careful there, kitty. What happened to your cat-like reflexes?"

She expected him to roll with her jokeâ€”laugh it off, evenâ€”but when he only offered a half-hearted and sheepish smile, unease rolled

down her spine.

_Something's very wrong. _

Without taking a single second to consider, she said, "I think we're done with our patrol tonight."

"What?" he asked in disbelief. "No! I've already had too many nights off! I'm feeling fine! I mean, I canâ€"

Her hand still rested on his arm, and she shut him up with a gentle squeeze. Once, Marinette wouldn't have allowed herself to get so close, to touch him so casually, but that had changed. It still shamed her to think it had taken a single hard hitâ€"one even her Miraculous Cure couldn't fixâ€"for her to realize just how much her partner meant to her.

She'd been an _idiot _to take him for granted.

"Feline," she muttered under her breath. "I'm _feline _fine." When Chat gaped like a beached fish, she gave him a sad smile. "Paris can hold its own for another night, Chat."

"Butâ€| what? Did you just _pun_? What's going on, my Lady? Is something wrong?"

_Yes, _she wanted to say. _What's wrong is you're not okay.

—

Without another word, Marinette launched herself up and flipped onto the roof. Knowing Chat would be nothing less than a step behind her, she started rambling before his boots could so much as touch solid ground. "At first I thought it was niceâ€"this silence," she said, a clumsy attempt at humor. "I thought, 'hey, I can actually focus tonight without my silly partner distracting me when we should be looking out for trouble,' but within the first _minute_, it got weird. Really, really weird."

Chat, who landed on the roof on all fours, eased out of his crouch and winced. Ladybug did not like the look on his face. His expression was carefully blank, more a mask than the one he was chosen to wear. It wasn't right, and her heart ached to see him soâ€|

Disengaged.

This isn't Chat.

"I was kinda hopingâ€"

"What? That I wouldn't notice?" She placed her hands on her hips. "You _always _find an excuse to play around during our patrols, even when you're not feeling well! It's always amazed me, reallyâ€"how you can be so perpetually cheerfulâ€"but it was like you weren't even here tonight! You didn't tease me when I slipped earlier! You didn't laugh or yell or joke or try to sneak up on me _once_, and there wasn't a single pun! And there were at least, like, _two _awesome opportunities for one, and you just didn'tâ€"

Marinette trailed off, noticing Chat's magical ears beginning to

flatten to his head, his posture and expression crumbling like a crust of dehydrated bread. He wasn't even trying to hide it any longer, and he stared at her as though she held the cure to a fatal disease he alone suffered from, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he struggled to hold it together.

For the first time since she had seen him go limp six weeks ago—the day he'd been cornered, helpless, and she'd been too late to prevent him from getting hurt—she felt genuine fear.

Whatever was bugging him (pun completely _not_ _intended), it was something worse than Marinette originally thought.

"Chat?" she asked, approaching hesitantly. "Is it your ribs? Are they still sore? I thought you said—"

He shook his head. "No, no, I'm fine. I'm fine. Can we continue? Please?"

Said the mess before her. She folded her arms, not buying it for a second. "You're not fine, kitty."

"I'm healed," he argued. He twisted agilely at the waist and stretched up to the sky. It was a relief to see he did so without grimacing in pain. Marinette could only thank her Ladybug luck that the very same akuma victim they fought _that day_ was also a nurse who felt obligated to treat Chat in recompense for the damage she'd done—and _continue_ to follow-up with both superheroes after the fact. They needed more civilians like her in the world. Heidi was a true angel, and without her help—

Ladybug shuddered to think what could have happened.

A hint of a genuine, victorious smirk touched Chat's lips, drawing her attention back to him. "See?"

Cocking her head, Ladybug considered her partner. It was obvious to her that he was trying—trying so, _so_ _hard—to prove he wasn't a liability. This was one of the first full patrols he had been allowed to accompany her on since he'd been injured, and since she (on Heidi's strong recommendations) had been the one to put him on house arrest, it was important to him that he show her he was ready to continue his duties.

He must have gone completely stir crazy, aching for the day he could return to the streets. He must have been beyond frustrated by how slow his recovery had been, by how patient and careful he had needed to be to divert attention from himself as he healed.

But this was the first time Marinette had seen him _show_ _any_ of this. The past few weeks, Chat had been nothing but a ball of cheer whenever she called to check up on him, his smiles broad and his optimism as unyielding as ever. Never once had he been bitter that she had mothered him for a majority of the last month, and never once had he blamed her for not getting to him in time _that day_.

If she were him, she would have exploded well before now, but then again, Chat had always been the stronger one. This, Marinette knew well.

But whatever _this_ was? She didn't understand_. _Something was eating him alive, driving him to the point of breaking, and as he fidgeted restlessly, looking everywhere but _at her, _she couldn't tell if he was struggling to restrain himself from screaming at the heavens or if he wanted nothing more than to run away, as far and as fast as he could go.

Innately, she knew she had to hold him here this time. There was no running from this.

I need you to be okay, _kitty._

"That doesn't mean you're fine," she whispered.

Chat blinked slowly at her. He took a deep breath, but before her eyes, he slumped forward, his nervous energy giving way to a bone-deep exhaustion. "Noâ€|" he admitted, his voice tiny. "No, it doesn't."

I should have known.

"Youâ€|You know I'm here for you, right?" Ladybug asked. "That you can talk to me?"

She reached out to him, but Chat rejected her touch. With a soft, strangled growl, he spun around, away from her, dragging his claws through his wild mane of hair.

"Châ€|chat?"

When he shook his head, Marinette decided to hell with it and rested her hand on his tense shoulder. He might not have wanted it, but he needed it. His muscles loosened at her touch, and without saying a word, she encouraged him to sit beside her. For several moments, they sat across from each other on the edge of the twilit roof.

"I wanted more time," he muttered suddenly, breaking the silence. "I've been trying to think of way to say this. To explain how much I need...I mean, I can'tâ€|"I didn't know..." He wrinkled his nose, looking disgusted with himself for attempting and failing to communicate what it was he wanted to say. His hand, still tangled in his hair, finally dropped from his head, and achingly desperate green eyes latched onto hers. "Are you ever afraid, Ladybug?" he blurted.

She didn't hesitate to respond. "The akumas are becoming stronger. Of course I am afraid."

"Iâ€|I'm not afraid of the akumas. I'm not afraid of Hawkmoth."

"Of getting hurt?"

He snorted. "Hardly."

"_Chat Noir._"

His eyes widened at her reproving tone, and he was quick to throw his hands up in an attempt to mollify her. "No need to throw a _hissy_ fit, _Maman_." He looked pleased when Marinette shot him an unamused look at the pun, and it almost felt normal until he looked away and

mumbled, "I don't need another lecture about throwing my remaining lives around like they're not worth anything. I've gotten enough of those already, I think."

Marinette didn't respond, not even to attempt a scowl or smile at him for calling her out on being a mother-hen. Instead she waited, hoping he'd continue without prompting.

"It's justâ€¦getting hurt made me realizeâ€¦no one _notices_."

The words were nothing more than a whisper, nearly stolen by the Parisian winds. Marinette almost missed it, and when the full impact of his last three words hit her, she stiffened. "_What_"

Chat's smile was self-deprecating. "No one notices," he said. "_No one. _Iâ€¦_" he looked at her, as though searching for permission to continue. Whatever he saw on her face must have been encouraging, for he plowed on. "There's no one. I'm surrounded by people all the time, but I don't have very many of those to call my own. It feels like it's just me and Plagg. Andâ€¦"and you."

She had suspected he hadn't the best home life for some time now, but this was the first time in the entirety of their partnership that her suspicions had been confirmed. "Oh, Chatâ€¦"

He interrupted her, swinging his legs and bouncing his heels off the brick beneath them. "I know that was sort of the pointâ€¦keeping what happened to me out of the media so that Hawkmoth couldn't take advantage of us. It was important to keep the limelight off my civilian identity, too, especially when we were so vulnerable, and I get it. I do. I did it well. It's just thatâ€¦my familyâ€¦" He shook his head, deciding not to finish the thought.

It was enough for Marinette to fill in the blanks.

"And even for the few friends I have who _are _close," Chat continued, "I've become such a good actor it's _scary_. I sometimes hate him, the part I have to play for everyone else, and that terrifies me, too, because he's _me_. He's supposed to be me, I'm supposed to be him, but Iâ€¦no one _knows_. _It'sâ€¦It'sâ€¦"

He inhaled shakily, his voice cracking, and with her heart throbbing with his pain, Ladybug shifted closer to him to lend all her support. "There's no one?" she repeated softly, trying so hard to understand.

"_None_," he choked.

This life wasn't always easy. It was lonely and grueling, and if she were being honest, it was sometimes thankless. Without Chat and Tikki, she'd be lost. Without her family's unending support, without Alya's kindness? Well, they might not know her as Ladybug, but they were there to keep her sane. They helped her retain some sense of normalcy. Despite her suspicions about what went on in his civilian life, she had thought that Chat was dealing with it all in the same way she was, and it rocked her to the core to realize she had assumed far too much.

Their secrets were tearing him apart, and she couldn't fathom experiencing even a sliver of the desolation he must be feeling. And

this was _her chaton. _Her fun-loving, laughter-filled, hot-headed Chat.

"Evenâ€|even _you_ don't know everything, do you?" Chat barked a humorless laugh. "You can't hide it, 'Bug. Even you're looking at me like I should be someone else."

A slash of guilt robbed Marinette of her breath. She couldn't deny it. "Someone did once say that the saddest people smile brightest," she murmured, smiling weakly when he snorted at the clichÃ©. "Knowing that doesn't make it any easier. I'm sorry, Chat."

I haven't been there for you.

He nodded absently and took a steadying breath. "I justâ€|I just keep thinkingâ€|what if something happens? What if Hawkmoth gets me? Or the akuma doesn't end up being a nurse like Heidi? What if what little luck I have runs out? What then? I'd never have the chance to reallyâ€|"

"Don't think like that! We're going to get him, _chaton_."

"That isn't it. That isn'tâ€|" Chat leapt up, tail flicking in his aggravation. "This isn't about us, and it isn't about _him_! For once in my goddamn life, I'm making this about _me_. _Call me selfish. Call me childish, but I'm terrified that if something happenedâ€|no one would _know_. No one would know what really happened to me and _why_ it happened. No one would understand. And whoâ€|" his voice failed him, and the passion from his tirade went with it. He spun on his heel, and looking out over the city, he finished, "â€|who would even care to?"

Ladybug surged to her feet, and before she knew it, she uttered, "I would."

Wide, guarded green eyes flashed back to her. He truly was a good actor, she noted, but maybe it was a testament to how close they were that she could sense just how much hope was threatening to overwhelm him. "Would you?" he breathed.

A dollop of fear oozed in her belly, her own insecurities rushing ahead of her logic and his needs. Because there was no doubt in her mind that Chat needed this. Desperately. Before things started getting serious, before Dark Cupid's arrow and Timebreaker's touch and Bone Surgeon's tools, she had always thought of Chat as a goof, someone who saw everyday life as his playground. But now, in breathtakingâ€|_heart wrenching_ clarityâ€|she saw through his carefree act. She saw sorrow eating away at the sunshine and laughter that was this amazing boy. She saw his loneliness and his fear that, one day, he would not be remembered, that he'd leave the earth without having made a single mark upon itâ€|or upon _someone_.

Chat suddenly smiled, his edginess replaced with an odd sort of peace. With a single nod to himself, he stepped forward, taking one of her hands in his. "I'm going to tell you," he said, and her breath caught in her throat. Mistaking her reaction for disapproval, he gently traced comforting circles on the back of her hand with his claws. "Please. I don't expect you to return the favor. I don't want to know if you're not ready, but _I_ need to tell you who I am. For me. Because I don't want toâ€|" He skipped over the word and looked

away. "Well, I wouldn't want to go without _someone _seeing meâ€|for me."

Marinette took a deep breath. She was glad he was the one to jumpstart this conversation, much in the same way he jumpstarted _everything _in their relationship, because now there was no turning back, no reason to give excuses. She always did work better under pressure. "You don't think I haven't been thinking about this?" she asked softly.

Chat stiffened, looking as though he could hardly believe his ears. "â€|_what_?"

"I've been thinking," Ladybug said, "And it's getting too dangerous for us _not _to know. I keep wondering what we could have done better, what we could have done to prevent you getting hurtâ€|"

"Hold on there, m'lady!" exclaimed Chat, holding up a hand. "If you're attempting to shoulder the blame again for thisâ€"

"No, _no. _Iâ€"maybe," she conceded. "But that's not the point! The point is that there is no reason to hide our identities anymore, is there? If we knew, we can plan better, train better, _be better._ You're not the only one who wants to be free of this secret. I was selfish to hide from you for so long. I was_ wrong_, and my stupid excuses hindered more than they helped. I see that now, and I trust you, Chat. I trust you with my life, and I'd trust you with my family's and my friends', if it came down to it. It _has _come down to it."

Silence descended upon the two heroes, the significance of what they had agreed to do crashing over them like a tsunami. She waited in anticipation for his reaction, but of course, Chat wasn't reacting much at all, his shell-shocked expression frozen in time.

Much to her surprise, he ended up laughing. It was nothing like his amused snickers, his whoops of joy, or his _true _laughter, which was adorkable (though she'd never admit it aloud) and a really rare thing to behold. This laughter was thin, but it was rich with relief, and before she knew it, his arms wrapped around her, pulling her into a tight embrace. Unprepared for his hug attack, Marinette allowed him to lift her and spin her around in a circle.

Who was she kidding? Even if she had expected it, she would have allowed it. Her heart pounded in her ears.

"So you _do_ go to my school!" Chat whispered excitedly as he pulled away, his luminous eyes scanning her face. Ladybug's eyebrows shot up, and he winked. "What else can a cat do but daydream about his lady when he's out of costume? It was pretty easy to figure that much out, especially when approximately sixty-nine percent of the akuma attacks that occurred in the past six months originated at that schoolâ€|and seventy-four percent of those times you were on scene before I was."

Marinette didn't know where to _begin. _It was shocking enough to realize those statistics were rather damning, which meant there was a high possibility she and Chat _knew _each other in their civilian forms, something she had never really anticipated given the size of

Paris. After shock came a surge of shame and disbelief at her own obliviousness. Chat was right: it was obvious. So stupidly and mind-blowingly obvious she wanted to kick herself. In the end, there was only thing she couldn't wrap her mind around. "â€|you _calculatedâ€|_?"

"That's _cat-_culated, mademoiselle," Chat corrected giddily. "Monsieur Girard isn't exactly stimulating in maths, is he? I find other ways to entertain myself."

_Oh my God. _Marinette's hand soared to her forehead, and she took a few steadying breaths. _He's in my class. He'sâ€|_

Shards of observation, half-forgotten and long dismissed, began to fit themselves into the greater picture, and an awe-inspiring sense of destiny settled over her.

"My Lady?" Chat asked. Hesitance, fear, and concern had broken his gleeful smile, and in that moment, she would have given anything to have that smile back. "I'mâ€|I'm sorry. I didn't meanâ€|to push. Or get so overexcited. If you'reâ€|if you're not ready, not as comfortable as you thought, it's okay. I canâ€|"we can justâ€|"

Ladybug shushed him with a nose boop. "Not likely, you big dork. If you need to reveal your identity, then I need to as well. We're in this together."

Chat's smile was blinding. Marinette's heart swelled to accept its warmth, and there, on that random rooftop in the dusky autumn twilight, she was ready to accept that she loved him with just asâ€|"if not moreâ€|"ferocity as she did Adrien.

And she was surprisingly okay with that.

It felt as though a dozen of Hawkmoth's akumas floated around in her stomach as she looked up at him. He grinned at herâ€|"to put her at ease, to reassure her? She didn't know, and swallowing, she grasped his hands.

She couldn't be sure how he'd react to finally learning who it was he placed on so high a pedestal. She couldn't know how _she_ would react to knowing this boy under the mask, the one who inspired her every day to be the hero Paris deserved. Not even two months ago, the utter fear she experienced even _thinking _about this moment was crippling. The anticipation now was no less nerve-wracking, but it wasâ€|somehow bearable. What was there to be afraid of in the end? A few moments of awkward floundering and staring? She could tolerate that: she had plenty of experience in that department with Adrien over the last two years, something she looked back on with red-faced embarrassment now that she and he were such good friends.

What she would not tolerate was losing Chat. Not after everything.

"I can't promise you that thisâ€|" she gestured between them, avoiding eye contact "â€|"won't change."

"_Together,"_ he reiterated. "It doesn't matter what happens now. We're in this together."

With him looking at her like thatâ€”like there was nothing on this earth that could change his opinion of herâ€”she could believe that it would be oath he'd never break.

"Okay," she said, smiling shyly. "Sur trois?"

Chat nodded. "Un."

"â€|Deuxâ€|"

"â€|_Trois._"

2. Chapter 2

When the light faded and their kwamis zipped away, Marinette could only stare. The cogs and gears in her mind shut down, leaving her raw and exposed in spellbound awe. She couldn't register that he was in no less awe than she was. She couldn't even pull herself together to feel a single iota of self-consciousness under his gaze.

Because _of course_. Of _course_ it was _him_.

Adrien Agreste was holding her hands in the place of Chat Noir, and he looked nowhere near ready to let go. The wind plucked at him, tossing his golden hair into a flawless mess and obscuring his spring green eyes from her, but he stood solid and strong against the chill, unmoving and unblinking.

Her chaton. Adrien was Chat, and Chat screamed from every last aspect of the boy before her.

How could she have missed this? How could she have missed the way Adrien's mischievous smirks reminded her of Chat and the way Chat's soft, considerate smiles reminded her of Adrien? How could she have missed the way they held themselves with such lithe grace and confidence? How could she have missed their humor, their bravery, and their stubborn refusal to look after themselves when someone else was in need? How could she have not connected their sensitivity and playfulness with their compassion and their mirth? And how, _pray tell_, could she have ever tormented herself with thoughts of how she could so easily betray her feelings for _Adrien_ with her feelings for _Chat_ when they were one in the same?

It was so obvious.

These boysâ€”this _boy_ had changed her life. He'd taken bullets for her, would lay down his life for her. He'd been possessed and manipulated, hurt both emotionally and physically on her behalf. This was the same boy who encouraged her the day she received her Miraculous, who made this burden bearable every single day. And just as well, this was the boy she'd once accused for sticking gum on her chair; who had begun to come over to help at her parents' bakery, simply because he loved to sneak cake batter and wanted nothing more than to spend time out of his empty house; who kicked ass at video games; who modeled and fenced and played piano and was a complete nerd when it came to physics and anime, andâ€|

This was the boy she fell in love with. Twice over.

Soft hands squeezed hers, and she blinked, focusing again on Adrien. He was smiling at her, smiling in a way that wasn't wholly Chat _or _Adrien, and just as she began to return his sheepish and gleeful smile, a giggle bubbling in her throat, he broke the silence.

"_Mari_."

For some reason, hearing her nameâ€"her _nickname_â€"in such a loving tone made everything come crashing down in one swoop. Her awe and utter delight that _it was him, of course it was him_ was destroyed by a black hole of mute horror.

_No one notices, _Chatâ€"Adrien had said.

No one.

The desolate and lonely words stampeded through her head like an avalanche. Guilt gnawed its way through her gut, a sense of failure stalking its path.

"Aâ€"Adrien," she stuttered, tears welling in her eyes. Her mind scrambled through her memories of the last six weeks. She'd been worried about Chat. She'd been distracted at school and with her friends. Even Nino had commented she'd been more spacey than usual. And Adrienâ€"|_oh God, Adrienâ€"|_ "Oh. Oh my God. I didn'tâ€"|I didn'tâ€" "

How had he managed to hide three cracked ribs, a nasty gash across his gut, and whatever else he suffered at Bone Surgeon's hands? Between his photo-shoots, his stylists and makeup teams, his father and school and fencingâ€"no, no, he _did _convince his father to give him a season off so that he could focus on his language studies, didn't he?â€"well, even without fencing, it was downright insane to even _fathom_â€"|

Adrien's brow furrowed, and his hands slipped down her forearms to support her as she staggered forward. "Hey," he said soothingly. "Marinette, it's okay. It'sâ€" "

If anything, his attempts to comfort her made her feel worse, and without thinking she burrowed her head into his chest, her tears beginning to fall. Maybe it was six weeks worth of worrying over this stupid idiot finally catching up to her. Maybe it was the realization that, for six weeks, she'd neglected Adrien in favor of Chat, who was the same person, and that was somewhat strange, but awesome, and not entirely fair. Maybe it had everything to do with the fact she was relieved and scared and happy and sad all at once, and maybe it was because she had been so _blind _to her friend's struggles, it hurt.

Whatever the reasons, it was Marinette, and not Adrien, who broke down. "No, it isn't okay," she mumbled into his shirt. "This is the furthest thing from okay."

"Bugaboo. Marinette. Shhhh." Far too tentatively, his fingers ghosted over her hair. "I can't understand you."

Oh, God, she was making a mess all over him. Her makeup was probably

ruining his shirt, and dammit, she was an ugly crier. With some reluctance, she drew away and babbled, "I didn't notice. You were hurt. For six weeks. Six weeks youâ€|and I didn'tâ€|Even before all of thatâ€"Youâ€|"

Adrien's eyes widened as she cut herself off in an attempt to control her emotions and collect her thoughts, and for a second, she thought he was going to snap at her. She didn't expect a pink flush to spread across his cheeks.

"Oh, thank God," he exhaled weakly. "For a second there, I thought you were upset with me for beingâ€"er, wellâ€|"

"What? No! No, no, no. No, why would I be upset at you? I'mâ€|I'm so happy_, Adrien. I'm so happy it's you! I'm more upset at me."

His thumb traced a tear track, brushing away the moisture there with a tenderness Marinette didn't deserve. "You shouldn't be."

"Of course I should be! I'm an awful friend! How could I not notice? How could I miss it all?"

"Alright, one: you are not an awful friendâ€"you're both of my best friendsâ€"and twoâ€|. You're Ladybug, Marinette." His tone was reverent, and she felt sick. "And Ladybug, you're Marinette. Both sides of the magical kwami were there when no one else was. Youâ€|didn't know know, but that doesn't mean you weren'tâ€" "

"But nothing!" Marinette interrupted. "You can't just ignoreâ€|I mean, youâ€|you needed meâ€"needed us, and where were we? This isâ€|these feelings and doubts have been stewing for a lot longer than six weeks, Adrien! And we neverâ€"we just let you act as though everything was okay andâ€" " Something occurred to her, and she suddenly pushed against his chest, propelling him away from her. "Wait, I take that back!"

"Umâ€|take what back?"

"The no! Because yes, I am upset with you! You should have told me ages ago about how you felt! I could have helped you! I would have in a heart beat! Did you seriously think that any of us wouldn't have dropped everything for you?" His eyes widened, and he stumbled a little when she re-entered his personal space. "You listen to me now, Adrien Agreste: you're never alone, you hear me? Never. And don't you dare feel like you need to put on an act when you're around me."

Those lovely green eyes blinked incredulously at her, and his fingers twitched forward again, their tips brushing at the fringe falling in her eyes. "I know that now," he said breathlessly. "Iâ€|"

"Good," she interrupted, taking his hand and removing it from her face. She needed to focus, and he wasn't helping. "Because I need you to know that I'm here for you, kit_â€"Adrien_. Sorry."

"Either or works," he mumbled. "Wait, umâ€|" He floundered for a moment, looking a little lost, and then settled with an awkward, "When we're alone, at least."

"Right. Umâ€|Same goes, I suppose." This wasn't how she imagined the

Big Reveal™ going. They were already so familiar with each other in both forms that it was jarring to realize that everything that should have changedâ€¦ didn't really. She was certainly aware that thisâ€œwhatever it wasâ€œshould have been weirder, but it really wasn't all that weird, which ultimately made it all very weird anyway.

Adrien was looking at her pretty weirdly, too, so she assumed he was in some form of agreement.

Weirdness aside, she couldn't afford to freak out now. Adrien and his reasons for wanting to reveal his identity were what were important here. "Well, this is a crazy life we share," she continued, "but I wouldn't have it any other wayâ€¦and I wouldn't want to share it with anyone else. Together, remember?"

After staring at her for an uncomfortable length of time, he laughed for no apparent reason. "How could I have never _seen _this?" Adrien asked, eyes alight and shining with awe. "You were right here the whole time."

Marinette sighed. "Was I really, Adrien?"

"Of course you were. I was too caught up in everything to see that the two most amazing people in my life were...the same person."

"Compliments aren't going to get you out of the hot seat, kitty. We're going to have to talk aboutâ€œ" she twisted her wrist ineffectually "â€œall this."

"It wasn't meant to be an empty compliment," Adrien denied. His gaze bore into her. "Without you, there wouldn't be a Chat Noir. You challenge me, you inspire me, and without you, Adrienâ€¦well, he wouldn't be anyone worth talking to, either. You make me feelâ€¦like I've never felt before, and I wouldn't have made it this far if I'd never met you, Marinette. Youâ€œyou mean _everything _to me."

Marinette gaped, her pulse racing_. _These were thoughts she'd had about Chat and Adrien more often than not lately, and it sounded so wrong to have her words come from his mouth when she'd done nothing to deserve them. Or at least, nothing in comparison to what he'd done for _her. _"Have I ever told you that when I first met Tikkiâ€¦I nearly gave up my Miraculous?" she blurted.

Adrien's horrified expression proved he found the idea completely absurd. "_What?_"

Nodding, Marinette continued, "After we failed to purify the akuma the first time, I took my earrings off. I told Tikki I wasn't the Ladybug she was looking for, and the next day, I slipped the Miraculous into Alya's bag. I thought she'd be a better Ladybug. I thought she'dâ€¦she'd _want _to be the Ladybug Paris deserved."

"My Ladyâ€¦"

"But you know what?" Marinette asked, looking up at him. "It was you who first showed me who I could be, _chaton. _It took me awhile to realize it because Alya's blind trust in Ladybug definitely helped,

too, butâ€|at the core of it, everything I've done as Ladybugâ€|it was just as much for _you_ as it was for Paris. You've supported me since day one, and all I wanted was to prove I was worthy of having someone like you as a partner. As Marinette? Wellâ€|that's another story entirely, but you, Adrien, are a huge part of that story." Feeling daring, she intertwined her fingers with his. "I'm who I am today because of _you_. And I guessâ€|I wanted you to know that. Whether you're Adrien or Chat, it doesn't matter. I know you, and I know that youâ€|"

For a split second, she didn't understand what had happened. One moment she was rambling away, and the nextâ€|

His lips were soft and warm against hers, the simple contact zinging its way through every nerve in her body, and of course she was as useless as ever. Unable to respond, she stood stock still as he drew away, eyeing her with so much gentleness and gratitude Marinette felt her heart would explode from the pure sweetness of his gaze.

Her mouth struggled around words, but she couldn't find her voice. She couldn't remember how to move, how to blink, and how could she? _Adrien Agreste_ had just kissed her. Chat Noir had just _kissed _her_. _Her_. _She was soaring and falling, falling oh-so-hard for this boy all over again.

I love you, I love you, I love you.

"I'm not sure if that's a good response or a bad one," Chatâ€|Adrien joked. The sound of his voice dragged her back to down to Earth, forcing a crash landing. His grin was all Chat, but there was something so remarkably cautious and reserved about hisâ€|Oh. This was bravado, she realized. For all his teasing, he feared her reaction. He feared rejection._

Howâ€|How had this become her life? Chat Noirâ€|Adrien Agresteâ€|looking like that? Because of _her_?

In the span of seconds, there was a gulf between them that wasn't there before. He was closing himself off, using humor as a shield, and now that she understood why he had done it in the past, she would _not _have that. Nope, she most certainly would not.

"You haven't hit me yet," he added with an odd, crooked smile, "so I assume I've finallyâ€|"

Marinette fisted her fingers into his shirt, tugged him forward, and kissed him back.

She wondered if this was how he felt, kissing her when she could do nothing more than stand as still as a statue. It was rather flattering, in a weird way, but it was also simultaneouslyâ€|discouraging. She attempted to step back, eyes lowered, and perhaps that's how he managed to surprise her a second time.

He followed her, his lips seeking to claim hers again. Chasing her down apparently took far too much effort when she already had a head start, so his hand found the small of her back, and he pulled her closer to him. She gasped against his lips, and he smiled, a low chuckle building in his chest.

Their third kiss was clumsy and far too chaste, but Marinette was convinced it was sort of perfect.

She wasn't ready to return to any sort of reality, not with her heart singing like this, not with his lips moving experimentally against hers. Far too soon for Marinette's liking, Adrien rested his forehead against hers and whispered, "You know what, m'Lady?"

"Hm?"

"I meant what I said. You're prettyâ€¦"

There was a shit-eating grin in his voice, and she knew what that meant. "Don't you _dare_," she warned, even as he leaned forward to whisper in her ear.

"_Miraculous._"

Marinette huffed and extracted herself from his arms to give him a very clear view of how unamused she was. "Unbelievable. I'm not sure you _deserve_ _another_ kiss after that."

The boy looked positively giddy. "_Awww, was it really thatâ€¦?"

"No."

"â€¦_pawful_?"

"_Nooooo._"

He snickered, smugness radiating from every last pore on his body. "Did I not just _whisker_ _you_ off your feet?"

"Why do I like you again?" Marinette asked the heavens, but she nudged him with her shoulder, smiling and rolling her eyes. "We were having an incredibly touching moment, andâ€¦"

"It was _purrrr_fectly adorable," he agreed. "_You're_ adorable. God, I love you."

"â€¦you just had toâ€¦" "Marinette faltered, her face igniting like a firework. "_What_?"

The lighthearted atmosphere disappeared, and Adrien knew better than to joke when she was looking at him so earnestly. "I love you," he repeated, and exhaling a laugh, he smiled. "That feels good to say. I haven't said it before, have I?"

Marinette melted then and there, nearly reduced to a state even her fifteen-year-old self would have found excessive. Here stood her long-time crush, one of her best friends, the partner she'd give the _world_ _forâ€¦|admitting he loved her. Aloud. In real life.

In the end, there really was only one way to respond to such a confession, and years later, she would wonder where she summoned the necessary amount of chill to do so.

Meeting his gaze with every last ounce of intensity, affection, and passion she could possibly muster, she said, "I love _mew_,"

too."

And to her utter mortification, _Adrien_ didn't get the pun_. He did not get the pun at all and stared at her for a moment before asking perplexedly, "â€|as inâ€|the PokÃ©mon?"

Adrien's question was met with dead silence.

(Years later, the couple would look back on this moment and tease each other mercilessly and without remorse).

In the present time, however, Marinette was only just understanding the hilarity of the situation. "Ohâ€|Oh my God," she stated. "Youâ€|you absolute _dork_."

Suddenly, she was laughing harder than she'd laughed in weeks. Because _Chat_ missed the pun _and_ because it was so _geeky_ _of_ him to assume she meant _Mewtwo_ _at_ a time like this and because it was so perfectly _typical_ _of_ her to botch her pun delivery and make everything super awkward.

"'Too' as in 'also', _chaton_," she giggled between gasps of air. "I _also_ love _mew_."

No one could deny that Adrien was smooth. He recovered very quickly and continued playing off his blunder. "Well, which one is it?" he teased. "Mewtwo or Mew?"

Marinette vowed then and there that she'd rather be caught dead than attempt a pun again, but tonight, she'd give it her all, if only to prove to him how much she loved him. "If we're talking first generation, I'm actually a big fan of Nidoran and its evolutions, smartass," she said as casually as she could. "But c'mon, Chat. Really? That was downright _Gastly_. Onix-eptable, _actually!_ You don't have to _Weedle_ a confession from me because, God help me, if I'm actually attempting to pun for you, I think it's a bit obvious I love you too."

"Oh," was his articulate response. "Oh, wow." He had the grace to look self-conscious before he too snorted and laughed. _Hard_. "Didâ€|did you just confess that you love me with a _pun?_"

"I _tried_ to confess that I love you with a pun, yes," Marinette corrected. "Iâ€|Adrien, I've been in love with you since we were fifteen."

The revelation stunned him, and his eyes widened in such an endearing way she wanted to hug him and never let go. "And I fell in love with you a second time a year later," she continued. "I thoughtâ€|well, whatever I thought, I thinkâ€|I think I failed."

"No, you didn't, M'Lady." He was leaning in again, and Marinette's heart threatened to burst from her chest. "Far, far from it. You _hate_ puns."

"They exasperate me. There's a difference."

"You hate puns," he repeated, as though he didn't consider there to be much of a difference at all, "and then you used _PokÃ©mon_ toâ€|"

"That was your fault. Mewtwo, Adrien? Honestly?"

Quite aware of the ridiculousness of their shared faux pas, they laughed until their sides ached, and it was hard to stop when one shared look between them set them off again.

"Iâ€"I can't believe youâ€" " Marinette gasped.

"I know! I know! I'm sorry! I'm an idiot. A completeâ€" "

"Kid!"

Choking on her own saliva, Marinette jolted at the unfamiliar voice and spun to find herself looking at a tiny black kitten, whose tail was being yanked by none other than her own kwami, her heels "digging" into the air in an attempt to keep the little imp from flying straight at them.

"Plagg?" Adrien asked, wiping laughter-induced tears from his cheeks. "What in the worldâ€"?"

"Plagg!" Tikki echoed, her tone sharper than Marinette had ever heard it before. "I can't believe you! This was a very important night for both Marinette and Adrien! You had no right to interrupt!"

"But I'm hungry, and your girl is hogging my boy."

"Your boy? Your personal cheese slave, more like," Adrien muttered under his breath. Marinette, who had only just started to control her breathing again, snickered at his dark humor.

"Exactly. The kid knows his priorities. Kwamis before missies. Or whatever it is they say in the boys' locker-room these days."

"Plagg!" Adrien hissed, looking horrified. He eyed Marinette apologetically, obviously expecting her to feel offended by his kwami's blatant rudeness. "Ignore him, Mari. He's got a personality to match the stinky food he makes me feed him."

In response, Plagg stuck out his tongue at his Miraculous holder.

And Marinette could not have been more charmed. She'd wondered a few times about Chat's kwami, but never would she have expected this. Plagg was absolutely perfect for Adrien, who looked so exasperated by the little guy's behavior that she laughed. "He's delightful, Adrien!"

"You did not just say that. You did not just condone his behavior."

Plagg himself purred contentedly. "Both you and Adrien need to learn from this one, Tikki." Considering Marinette with renewed interest, he admitted, "Maybe you aren't so bad after all, li'l 'Bug, even if you make Adrien over there completely useless with pining some nights."

Marinette ignored Adrien's embarrassed _shut up, Plagg _and said, "It's nice to meet you, too, Plagg."

"Likewise, I suppose. Now lay _off, _Tikki. Your chosen has forgiven me. I think I'm off the hook."

Tikki scoffed and released his tail at the exact moment Plagg tried to pull away, causing him to tumble head-over-heels in midair. When he righted himself, the black kwami huffed and zipped to settle in Adrien's blond hair. "Rude."

Rolling her eyes, Tikki faced Marinette. "I am sorry about interrupting, Marinette. Adrienâ€|" she floated toward him. "It is an honor to finally meet you."

Adrien smiled. "And you."

Tikki trilled happily, and Marinette glanced around, sighing. Dusk had long since come and gone, the air nipplier than it had been a mere hour ago. She shivered and rubbed her arms. "It is getting late."

Adrien's face fell as he, too, considered the hour, but when he turned back to her, his face lit up. "Would the princess care for an escort home?"

"Is Plagg up for it?" Marinette teased.

"Of course he is," Adrien assured before Plagg could so much as open his mouth. "And he'll get a triple helping of cheese when we get home if he keeps his mouth shut and doesn't argue _justthisonceplease_."

Plagg cackled and saluted, which must have been enough for Adrien, who said, "And maybeâ€|we can talk about dinner? Well, not _about _it so much as when we could goâ€|and have it? Tomorrow? Maybe?"

So cute. She was going to die he was so cute, and she swore her grin could have split her face. "I'd love to go out with you, kitty."

He blew out a breath and smiled dazzlingly. "Plagg," he commanded, "Claws out!"

Adrien's transformation was the most striking thing she'd ever had the fortune to witness. It was whimsical, it was powerful, and it was _beautiful_, and she felt like she was seeing himâ€|"all of him, as he truly was, without masks and expectations to weigh him downâ€|"for the first time.

Chat Noir offered her a clawed hand. "Well, m'Lady?"

Without taking her eyes off of his for a single second, she accepted his hand and said, "Spots on, Tikki."

She would be lying if she said she didn't revel in watching his expression as she transformed.

When Ladybug blinked her eyes open, their hands were still clasped, and Chat smiled at her without inhibition, looking happier and more at peace than she'd ever seen him before.

You do see me, he said without words. _You see _me_. Thank you, thank you, thank you._

"We haven't finished our conversation, Adrien," Ladybug mused aloud, and she felt a thrill calling _her chaton_ his given name.

Chat shrugged. "Perhaps, but for tonight, can we drop it? Tonightâ€¦I don't want anymore of it to be wasted on me." She almost put her foot right and scolded him then and there for using the word _waste _in such a way, but in an affectionate tone she absolutely could not refuse, he said, "Tonight is for us."

She squeezed his hand. "Us," she agreed.

They were Chat Noir and Ladybug, Adrien Agreste and Marinette Dupain-Cheng, and there were still secrets between them, still insecurities and doubts to iron out. There were plenty of things she needed to tell him, and no doubt there were plenty of things he needed to tell her, but as Adrien said, tonight was theirs', and if the way things were going were any indication, there'd be plenty of time for "later."

End
file.